

# BILL HENDERSON

his Complete  
Vee & Jay Recordings



Volume 1

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- |                               |      |
|-------------------------------|------|
| 1. Bye Bye Blackbird          | 3:02 |
| 2. Joey, Joey, Joey           | 4:43 |
| 3. Free Spirits               | 2:41 |
| 4. Sweet Pumpkin              | 2:59 |
| 5. Love Locked Out            | 4:39 |
| 6. It Never Entered My Mind   | 5:45 |
| 7. My Funny Valentine         | 4:28 |
| 8. Moanin'                    | 2:32 |
| 9. Bad Luck                   | 3:37 |
| 10. The Song Is You           | 2:58 |
| 11. This Little Girl Of Mine  | 2:40 |
| 12. You Make Me Feel So Young | 3:09 |
| 13. Without You               | 2:22 |
| 14. Sleepy                    | 2:42 |
| 15. I Go For That             | 3:51 |
| 16. Sleepy                    | 2:20 |
| 17. Kiss And Run              | 3:45 |
| 18. A Sleepin' Bee            | 3:57 |

KOC-CD-8548





## BILL HENDERSON: THE COMPLETE VEE JAY SESSIONS, VOLUME ONE

**ONE SUMMER NIGHT IN 1958**, the viewers of *Jazz Party*, a primitive series on New York public TV, heard host Art Ford introduce a "sensational new vocalist." At thirty-two, Bill Henderson had just moved to town from Chicago, but good things were already happening: in June he had cut a single, *Señor Blues*, with the Horace Silver Quartet; in July, Billie Holiday offered to set him up with her manager. "I like the way you sing," she told the startled Henderson.

Unlike most other young men singing jazz, this was no scoobey-doo hipster trying to act cool. His big tortoiseshell glasses and toothy smile gave him an egghead look, while his voice — a distinctively grainy baritone with a bluesy midnight intimacy — aimed to show off the songs, not the singer. Performing *Baby, Won't You Please Come Home*, Henderson looked so wrapped up in the story that the presence of Roy Eldridge, Buck Clayton, Buster Bailey, and Georgie Auld in the band didn't seem to intimidate him at all.

"Well, that was a fake!" he said forty-two years later. "When you're dumb and have no idea what's going on, it's like being thrown into a briar patch. You've got to figure out how you're gonna get out of there alive."

Starting in the late '60s, Henderson became known as an actor on TV (*The Bill Cosby Show*, *Sanford & Son*, *Harry-O*, *Good Times*) and in a long series of films, notably *White Men Can't Jump* (with Wesley Snipes), *City Slickers* (with Billy Crystal), and *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai*. But jazz fans treasure him as a singer. From 1959 through 1961, he made his early mark on Vee Jay, the Chicago-based company whose rich catalogue of black music was overshadowed by its release of the Beatles' first sides. At Vee Jay, Henderson got to record with Miles Davis's rhythm section (Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, and Jimmy Cobb), the Count Basie orchestra, Tommy Flanagan, Freddie Green, Yusef Lateef, Elvin Jones, and the Ramsey Lewis trio; his arrangers included Thad Jones, Benny Golson, Frank Wess, and Jimmy Jones. "I don't think I've ever gotten over that," he says.

Henderson's "hip, musicianly, personal, and individual sound," as Leonard Feather called it, made him the equal of those musicians. His Vee Jay sides have been in and out (but mostly out) of print since the '60s. Now, all thirty-nine of them are back.



Born in Chicago on March 19, 1926 (not 1930, as the *Encyclopedia of Jazz* claims), William Randall Henderson grew up hearing his mother's 78s of Bessie Smith, Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry, and other blues singers. But his father, a chemist, showed him the seductive power of singing softly. "He was not in show business, but he loved to sing," says Henderson. "He sang very quietly. His favorite song was *There's Danger in Your Eyes, Cherie*. He used to sing it to my mother."

At five, the child won a spot in a traveling vaudeville show, *The Artists and Models Ball*, that had come to Chicago. Dancing and singing in a sailor suit, he won attention. "I always wanted to be understood," he says, "so I enunciated like crazy. That was my approach — I just loved the words."

But his mother sent him back to school. "That was a sad day for me!" he recalls. Henderson spent the next few years playing in student productions. He enrolled half-heartedly in trade school to become a mechanic, but dropped out to try a singing career. Opportunities were scarce until 1950, when he got drafted. For two years, Henderson and an already famous singer, Vic Damone, performed with the same army band, entertaining troops throughout Europe and America. Once home, though, Henderson's musical activity ground to a near-halt. He ended up working as a punch-press operator, while commiserating with his friend Joe Williams, another Chicago singer in the scuffling stage.

Williams went on tour with Count Basie in 1954, but Henderson stayed in Chicago, sitting in at whichever clubs he could. Near the start of 1957 he became a regular at Stelzer's Lounge, a jazz joint whose pianist, the twenty-one-year-old Ramsey Lewis, was causing a local stir. Lewis loved Henderson's voice, and with his newly formed trio he backed the singer on a demo of *Joey, Joey, Joey*, a song from a then-current Broadway hit, *The Most Happy Fella*. Two Chicago DJs, Mike Rapchak and Sid McCoy, played it on the air, and soon people began noticing him. Billy Taylor, one of New York's more celebrated young pianists, heard Henderson in Chicago, and told the singer to look him up should he ever get to Manhattan.

Hopes high, Henderson drove to New York in early 1958. He and a friend, songwriter Don Newey, rented a cheap room together at the Empire Hotel at Broadway and 63rd Street. Henderson was dazzled by the city. "New York was big, it was huge, it was the place to be!" he says. "It's an amazing place, to see all that activity, when you first go there. It was like swarms of bees. Up and down Broadway, Seventh Avenue, all of the clubs, Birdland, everything, man, it was just exciting. I was hoping that I would fit in, you know?"

Magically, everything seemed to fall into place. Billy Taylor took the singer around to recording companies, one of which, Riverside, signed him for a single with Hank Jones, Wilbur Ware, Philly Joe Jones, Julius Watkins, and Charlie Rouse. "I was floored, man!" says Henderson. One night he had the chance to sing in Horace Silver's living room; subsequently the pianist

used him on *Señor Blues*, a Silver 45 on Blue Note. Years later, in an interview with John S. Wilson of the *New York Times*, Henderson recalled the thrill of hearing the disk played at Colony Records, a huge midtown music shop: "I'd stand in the entrance and listen to my voice and I'd think, 'That's wonderful!'" That fall he made four Blue Note sides of his own, then he debuted at the Village Vanguard opposite Sonny Rollins.

But like Cinderella after the ball, Henderson resumed an unglamorous life offstage. To pay the rent, he swept chimneys and de-veined shrimp in a private club. In 1959 he got a surprise call from Sid McCoy, who had recently founded a jazz line at Vee Jay Records. Long before Motown, Vee Jay was the most successful black-owned label in America, with a roster of stars in gospel (the Staple Singers, the Swan Silvertones, Maceo Woods), blues (Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker), and R&B (the Dells, the Spaniels, Jerry Butler). Now McCoy was signing Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers, Wayne Shorter, Lee Morgan, Gene Ammons, Eric Dolphy, and Eddie Harris. Bill Henderson became Vee Jay's first jazz singer.

He made his initial album that fall in Chicago. It proved his superb taste in songs. "I didn't have much of a repertoire; the nightclub thing was very spare at that time," he explains. "But when I knew I was gonna record, there were a lot of things I had heard about that I wanted to do."

The first session, with the Ramsey Lewis trio, has the feeling of a late-night jazz set. The tunes include three Miles Davis trademarks. **Bye Bye Blackbird** shows off Henderson's relaxed delivery: he lingers behind the beat with an gentle swagger, while treating the microphone as if it were the listener's ear. **It Never Entered My Mind** and **My Funny Valentine** reveal a man unafraid to show his vulnerability. Singing in spare, hushed phrases, Henderson shades words as sensitively as Davis shaded notes. He builds tension in subtle, masterful ways, which is why his final "please stay" in **Valentine** comes across so powerfully. Rarely had a singer dug so deeply into **Love Locked Out**, the Ray Noble ballad of 1933, or **Joey, Joey, Joey**. Lyrics, he told Leonard Feather, were a "very vital thing" for him. "If you have a tremendous range like Yma Sumac, okay, but if all you have is the words, then you try to tell that story and let the arrangement take care of the rest of it. I think it would be more effective than to try to sound like a horn and make it become self-consciously super-hip." **Free Spirits** was later recorded by Chris Connor and Jimmy Witherspoon, but its composer, bassist Norman Mapp, wrote the song for Henderson. The singer also introduced **Sweet Pumpkin**, a teasing love song by pianist Ronnell Bright. Throughout the session, Ramsey Lewis matches Henderson's eloquence and restraint.

On the second date, Benny Golson arranged for a group that included trumpeter Booker Little, saxophonist Yusef Lateef, and the Wynton Kelly Trio, Davis's group at the time. Among the songs are **Moanin'**, the 1958 Bobby Timmons classic that Jon Hendricks had outfitted with words; **Bad Luck**, written and recorded by Dinah Washington in 1957; and **Without You**,

a tender ballad by Don Newey. The singer and his bebop accompanists drive one another with an easy, swinging pulse. "That was a tremendous feeling I got from those guys," says Henderson. "They were very warm and very giving."

The finished LP, *Bill Henderson Sings*, delighted musicians and hipper vocal fans, but it went unreviewed in *Down Beat* and *Metronome*, the industry's top journals. Some listeners thought he sounded like Joe Williams; others confused him with Jon Hendricks, who looked similar. Henderson recalls an increase in gigs, but the one that stands out in his mind is a dismal job in the Catskills, on a bill with a Jolson-impersonating emcee who told him to "learn some Jewish songs."

In 1960 he recorded little. A January session featured two witty rarities, sung with an octet led by and including Frank Wess, Count Basie's arranger and saxophonist. **I Go for That**, a Frank Loesser song from the 1939 film *St. Louis Blues*, came to Henderson's attention through the performances of Audrey Morris, Chicago's most beloved singer-pianist. Trumpeter Bobby Bryant, who played on the Wess date, wrote **Sleepy**, a horn solo with playful words by Oscar Brown, Jr. Henderson re-recorded it in August with MJT+3, a Vee Jay band led by drummer Walter Perkins. Released as a single, it went unnoticed.

That November, the label tried a sales-boosting device. They teamed Henderson with Jimmy Jones, the string arranger whose make-out albums with Sarah Vaughan and Joe Williams were heard in many a bachelor pad. For his first session with Jones, the singer chose **A Sleepin' Bee**, from the Harold Arlen-Truman Capote musical *House of Flowers*, and **Kiss and Run**, a tune first heard in 1956 as a chirpy novelty for singer Peggy King. Henderson's ballad version enchanted singer-pianist Shirley Horn, who eventually recorded it even more slowly. *Down Beat* took notice of Henderson too: the same month he teamed with Jones, the magazine gave him a full-page story. "Henderson is arriving a little late — but he *is* arriving," it said. [continued in Volume Two]

— James Gavin, New York City, 2000

[James Gavin's work has appeared in the New York Times and Village Voice. Knopf will publish his forthcoming biography of Chet Baker.]

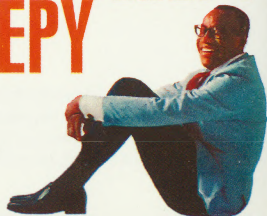
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1. BYE BYE BLACKBIRD 2. JOEY, JOEY, JOEY 3. FREE SPIRITS  
4. SWEET PUMPKIN 5. LOVE LOCKED OUT 6. IT NEVER ENTERED MY MIND  
7. MY FUNNY VALENTINE 8. MOANIN' 9. BAD LUCK 10. THE SONG IS YOU  
11. THIS LITTLE GIRL OF MINE 12. YOU MAKE ME FEEL SO YOUNG  
13. WITHOUT YOU 14. SLEEPY 15. I GO FOR THAT 16. SLEEPY  
17. KISS AND RUN 18. A SLEEPIN' BEE



1. BYE BYE BLACKBIRD 2. JOEY, JOEY, JOEY, JOEY 3. FREE SPIRITS 4. SWEET PUMPKIN 5. LOVE LOCKED OUT 6. IT NEVER ENTERED MY MIND 7. MY FUNNY VALENTINE 8. MOANIN' 9. BAD LUCK 10. THE SONG IS YOU 11. THIS LITTLE GIRL OF MINE 12. YOU MAKE ME FEEL SO YOUNG 13. WITHOUT YOU 14. SLEEPY 15. I GO FOR THAT 16. SLEEPY 17. KISS AND RUN 18. A SLEEPIN' BEE

1. **BYE BYE BLACKBIRD** (Mort Dixon-Ray Henderson)
2. **JOEY, JOEY, JOEY** (Frank Loesser)
3. **FREE SPIRITS** (Norman Mapp)
4. **SWEET PUMPKIN** (Ronell Bright)
5. **LOVE LOCKED OUT** (Ray Noble-Max Kester)
6. **IT NEVER ENTERED MY MIND** (Richard Rodgers-Lorenz Hart)
7. **MY FUNNY VALENTINE** (Richard Rodgers-Lorenz Hart)  
recorded October 26, 1959. Ramsey Lewis (piano), Eldee Young (bass), Red Holt (drums).
  
8. **MOANIN'** (Bobby Timmons-Jon Hendricks)
9. **BAD LUCK** (Dinah Washington-Juanita Hill)
10. **THE SONG IS YOU** (Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II)
11. **THIS LITTLE GIRL OF MINE** (Ray Charles)
12. **YOU MAKE ME FEEL SO YOUNG** (Josef Myrow-Mack Gordon)
13. **WITHOUT YOU** (Don Newey)  
recorded October 27, 1959. Booker Little (trumpet), Bernard McKinney (trombone), Yusef Lateef (tenor sax), Wynton Kelly (piano), Paul Chambers (bass), Jimmy Cobb (drums), Benny Golson (arranger).
  
14. **SLEEPY** (Bobby Bryant-Oscar Brown, Jr.)
15. **I GO FOR THAT** (Frank Loesser-Matty Malneck)  
recorded January 27, 1960. Bobby Bryant (trumpet); Benny Powell (trombone); Billy Mitchell, Frank Wess (tenor sax); Charlie Fowlkes (baritone sax); Gildo Mahones (piano); Bob Cranshaw (bass); Al Duncan (drums); Frank Wess (arranger).
  
16. **SLEEPY** (Bobby Bryant-Oscar Brown, Jr.)  
recorded August 29, 1960. MJT+3: Willie Thomas (trumpet); Frank Strozier (alto sax); Harold Mabern (piano); Bob Cranshaw (bass); Walter Perkins (drums).
  
17. **KISS AND RUN** (Jack LeDru-Rene Dononcin-William Engvick)
18. **A SLEEPIN' BEE** (Harold Arlen-Truman Capote)  
recorded November 21, 1960. Orchestra arranged by Jimmy Jones; probably Bernie Leighton (piano), Milt Hinton (bass), Elvin Jones (drums).

All tracks recorded at Universal Recording Corp., Chicago.

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